

ACTIONS & VOICES

The Catalan theatre tradition survived during the better part of the XIX century with the one-act farce and, afterwards, with Frederic Soler’s *Pitarra*, a work that expanded and converted the tradition into costume-based comedies.

Àngel Guimerà brought to it a hefty combination of romanticism and realism with works like *Maria Rosa* (Maria Rosa, 1894), *Low Country* (Terra baixa, 1897) and *The Daughter of the Sea* (La filla del mar, 1900).

Between the early 20th century, modernism arrived to the Catalan stage particularly with the work of Adrià Gual, the pioneering creator at the Teatre Intim, and Santiago Rusiñol, the author of *The Tale of Senor Esteve* (L’auca del senyor Esteve, 1917), the piece that created the archetypal shopkeeper, “Senor Esteve.” Later, during the 20s and 30s, the poetic theatre of Josep M. De Sagarra found a loyal and sizeable audience.

The outbreak of the Civil War and the revolution brought the collectivising of theatres and the appearance of some revival theatre, like *Hunger* (La Fam, 1938), by Joan Oliver.

There was almost a complete prohibition of theatre in Catalan between 1939 and 1946. A true revival of the Catalan stage did not come until the appearance of the Dramatic Group of Barcelona (l’Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona, 1955-1963), and, above all, the Adrià Gual School of Dramatic Art (1960) that introduced epic theatre to the national stage and promoted the Salvador Espiru’s work, *The Death Watch In Sinera* (Ronda de mort a Sinera, 1965) and *The Original History of Esther* (Primera història d’Esther, 1968).

In the 60s and 70s, there were two significant events that stood out: the appearance of independent theatre groups like The Jugglers (1962), The Comedians (1972) and The Ferret of the Baus (1979), and authors like Josep M. Benet i Jornet, Rodolf Sirera, Sergi Belbel and Jordi Galceran.

MIQUEL M. GIBERT



INTERVIEW

SERGI BELBEL:

ÀNGELS AYMAR

Sergi Belbel is Director of the National Theatre of Catalonia (TNC) and the Catalan playwright with the most works in translation and performed abroad. He just returned from New York where there was a reading of his play Mòbil* (Mobile), a work that has been translated into English, Danish, German, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish and Dutch. This season he directed Àngel Guimerà’s play En pólvora (In Dust) at the TNC and October will see the premiere of A la Toscana (In Tuscany), his own most recent work, which has been translated into German and Italian.

“I prefer to direct my own works first, and after that other points of view are fine by me.”

What contributes more, the experience of directing to your writing, or writing to directing?

Directing is an apprenticeship for writing, more than the reverse. Directing enables me to go deeply into someone else’s work. I like directing Molière, Shakespeare or other contemporary writers, for example.

What works are on your list for directing?

I’ve got three: Racine’s Phaedra, Molière’s Don Juan, and Shakespeare’s King Lear. I’ve never directed any Greek tragedy – any play by Aeschylus, or Sophocles or Euripides, for example – and that’s something I’d like to do.

Do you go about writing all your plays in the same way?

You could say that the time of year in which the writing happens, which has been summer these last years, is the only point they have in common. Otherwise, each play goes its own way. There are some I think about a lot before writing and others, like A la Toscana, which I wrote as it came out. Once I start writing, if I start thinking about it too much, I leave it. If I get into the process as if I’m on a binge, I just keep going. It’s like a jar that’s filling up and when it starts to spill over, I sit down at the computer.

How are things in Catalan theatre at present?

It’s creative, with more resources and greater opportunities. We have public theatre, private theatre and alternative theatre. If you take this season’s list of premieres, you’ll see how many Catalan authors have been staged this year. This encourages the appearance of new people, which didn’t happen before. At the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, playwrights were rather out of it and most were regarded as bourgeois writers who had to disappear. There’s been a great change in the last fifteen years.

Is writing in Catalan a limitation?

The language doesn’t determine the success of the project.

What is theatre for you?

It means presenting the spectator with a challenge that is found nowhere else but there. Theatre cultivates a space for communication without intermediaries. It’s direct.

Everybody has his or her ideas about the function theatre should have. What moves me is to see how someone has come especially to see a play, has made the effort to come and see a live version of a story or an actor on stage. This is why it doesn’t disappear, because it’s an art that works with reality.

What would you like to achieve as director of the National Theatre?

Quality popular theatre, that everyone can see and where everyone can find something. It can be done. Shakespeare did it.

Do you think people in other countries are interested in our theatre?

More and more.

Is there any feature in particular that characterises Catalan theatre writing?

Apart from the language itself, yes, there are things ... but I’m not sure if I can put it into words. From inside and without enough distance, it’s very difficult to say. Nowadays, for example, there’s a tendency of Argentine influence that has contributed a more light-hearted feel to our writing. In my times, the main influence was Sanchis Sinisterra.

Should parity exist?

I don’t think the criterion is positive in itself. Maybe in fifty years’ time it won’t be necessary but it is now, especially in scientific and creative work because men have been occupying these posts in too high a percentage. Parity is a way of settling what has been happening over so many centuries. I hope it will be a transitory measure.

What concerns you most about today’s world?

About the world? Oh, a lot of things bother me! The polarisation between the West and the rest, especially the Middle East. The health of the world. The distribution of wealth ... In that regard, I’m happy to pay taxes!

Sergi Belbel is a cultivated, curious man, a lover of science, a good conversationalist, sharp-witted and playful at all levels, both with his students and in his own writing.

“Playing is also a form that is useful in giving structural organisation to a work. It helps to establish strategies and encourages reflection, all within the same game.”

But what I admire most about him is the passion with which he speaks about theatre because this is a way of being in the world that is increasingly difficult to find.

*“Mobile” has been translated into English by Marion Peter Holt and the play was read in May 2007 as part of the cycle “Readings of Catalan Playwrights at MESTC”, Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, New York.

ON POETRY

The voice of Joan Vinyoli (1914 – 1984) is one of the most refined of inter-war expressionist post-Symbolism. A superb translator of Rainer Maria Rilke into Catalan, he always aspired in his own work to bring to light the poetic frisson, on the basis of his own observation of reality. A poet of everyday experience formalised in highly expressive symbols, his poems express implacable solitude, the anguish of primitive want and the incessant, relentless loss of love and joy. Taking pleasure in the vigour of the living word, Joan Vinyoli’s poetry ignites the spaces of most intimate experience and offers them transformed into sincere literary emotion of soaring lyrical register.

Self-Portrait at Sixty-Five

Look at how I have the flown face

of an old satyr. What a winy
colour of life lived the full,

now irretrievable. Empty glasses.

Yet still I gather grapes with a false
voracity, and get myself drunk

on the wine of the years. And I reel, groping

at walls of darkness, now never touching

the peach-skin body of any woman,

for I am no longer in love.

A wasted time

Of life this is, for nothing but floundering about.

Autoretrat a seixanta-cinc anys

Mira’m la cara encesa

de sàtir vell. Quina vinosa

color de vida molt viscuda,

ja no recuperable. Vasos buïts.

Cullo, però, raïm amb una falsa

voracitat i m’embriago

de vi dels anys. I tentinejo, palpo

parets de fosca, no tocant ja mai

el cos de préssec de cap dona,

car ja no estic enamorat.

Malaguanyat

temps de vida, aquest, tant sols per patollar-hi.

J. Vinyoli, *In the Small Hours* (1981) (Translated by David Warwick Orr)

J. Vinyoli, *A hores petites* (1981) in *Obra poètica completa*, Barcelona: Edicions 62 / Diputació de Barcelona, “Clàssics Catalans”, 2001

WORK IN PROGRESS



LLUÏSA CUNILLÉ

Born in Badalona in 1961, Lluïsa Cunillé Salgado is one of the most established playwrights in the Catalan theatre scene. Since 1992, when the Teatre Romea of Barcelona staged her play *Rodeo*, more than thirty of her works have been performed. Notable among these are *La festa* (The Party, 1994), *Accident*, winner of the 1997 Institute of Catalan Letters Prize, *Vacantes* (Vacant, 1996), *Apocalipsi* (Apocalypse, 1996), *Dotze treballs* (Twelve Labours), which was premiered at the 1998 Festival of Sitges, *Passatge Gutenberg* (Gutenberg Passage), winner of the 1994 Critics of Barcelona Prize, *Mapa d’ombres* (Map of Shadows), winner of the City Barcelona Prize for the Scenic Arts, the Max Prize and the National Theatre Prize, and *La cantant Calba al McDonald’s* (The Bald Soprano in McDonald’s, 2006). Her play, *Tot assajant Pitarra* (Rehearsing Pitarra), written with Xavier Albertí, is newly-premiered.

Fragment from the play El bordell (The Brothel)

A stormy night. The bar of a roadside brothel. The OLD TRANSVESTITE is asleep, slumped over a table. Standing at his side is the TRAVELLER, still in her overcoat. She rings a handbell three or four times. Silence. The OLD WHORE appears on the stairs.

OLD WHORE: If men had their dicks where their feet are they’d be in no danger of getting chilblains.

(Pause)

TRAVELLER: Did you call me?

OLD WHORE: Yes.

TRAVELLER: Are you in charge here?

OLD WHORE: No. (Goes behind the bar.)

TRAVELLER: Can I speak with the owner?

OLD WHORE: When he wakes up you can speak to him.

TRAVELLER: Is he the owner of this?

OLD WHORE: He and two other partners bought the business for me twenty-five years ago. I’ve been working for them ever since. I run the bar and make sure everything goes smoothly. (Pause.) Do you want a drink?

TRAVELLER: What’s the bell for?

OLD WHORE: He hates being alone for very long. Normally, when he’s had too much to drink I call for a taxi before he starts to sleep it off.

(Pause.)

TRAVELLER: Have you got a room free?

OLD WHORE: You want a room?

TRAVELLER: For him, so he can lie down somewhere.

OLD WHORE: He’s too heavy to carry upstairs.

TRAVELLER: Isn’t there anyone who can help us?

OLD WHORE: You see someone else round here?